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Magazine named CIA agents, gets into trouble

Covert Action is a target of recent legislation

By Paul Aaron
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WASHINGTON - The magazine's activities have been denounced by the New York Times as "despicable." Jack Anderson said that "the people who put it out have great connections with communist intelligence agencies." Congress eventually legislated curbs on what one senator, John Chafee of Rhode Island, referred to as "the illegitimate press."

The periodical that provoked these broadsides is Covert Action. In its three years of publication, its campaign to thwart clandestine operations by the US intelligence community has included listing the names of hundreds of CIA undercover agents.

To defend against this perceived danger, Congress last month passed a bill making anyone revealing the identity of an agent, "with reason to believe such identification would impair or impede the foreign intelligence activities of the US," liable to 10 years in prison and a \$50,000 fine.

The law's sponsors commend it as a vital safeguard, but opponents are organizing to try to get it overturned on constitutional grounds. Civil liberties groups say the evidence necessary for prosecution under the law is subjective to the point of being open-ended. They believe it contains an implicit threat to First Amendment rights that may intimidate reporters investigating CIA abuses.

Ellen Ray, Bill Schapp, and Lou Wolf, who run Covert Action from a cluttered, minuscule office in the National Press Club Building in Washington, make no attempt to conceal their political sympathies. Their collective experience provides a map of the

radical movement in recent years.

Friendship with Philip Agee galvanized a commitment to "Third World liberation struggles," which the three already shared. Agee, a CIA case officer for 13 years, broke ranks with the agency in 1975. He said that while he was with the agency he took part in systematic, secret efforts to manipulate and destabilize forces for social change in other nations and to preserve authoritarian regimes attentive to US interests.

Agee's crusade to reveal the inner workings of the CIA was joined by Ray, Schapp and Wolf. The three editors (Agee is now in exile, his passport revoked by the State Department) hope exposure will alert intended CIA targets abroad, and compromise agency attempts to penetrate and influence foreign countries. In addition, Covert Action aims to galvanize the US public so it will scrutinize CIA methods.

"The CIA's original charter from 1947, which spoke about the need to gather intelligence, sift through it and get the facts to the President, has long since been abandoned," Ray said in an interview. "Today, other government agencies do the bulk of data retrieval and analysis. The CIA's role is action-oriented: paramilitary operations, the rigging of elections, the subversion of governments."

According to Wolf, such covert mechanisms increasingly supplant, rather than supplement, diplomatic open channels. As the trend continues, Wolf believes, the Reagan Administration increasingly will seek to restrict opportunities for the public in the United States to learn the facts about for-

eign countries and debate the issues.

"What's happening today goes well beyond whether we're able to identify agents in our magazine," he said. "We've stopped that practice pending a court decision, but our magazine really hasn't been affected, since naming names is only a very small part of what we do. The overall context is a growing official disrespect for First Amendment rights."

As evidence of "an ominous pattern," he cites:

- The recently proposed "executive order on classification," which will not only expand the prerogatives of the government to withhold documents previously available to the public, but also will permit the reclassification and recall of data already released to scholars, journalists and citizens through the Freedom of Information Act.

- Departing CIA Deputy Director Bobby Inman's view that if the US scientific community fails to police itself, and the "hemorrhaging of Western technology" to the Soviets persists, the government may regulate both the conduct of research and the availability of its findings.

- Dire warnings by Attorney General William French Smith of an "insidious" Soviet "disinformation" offensive, along with statements by President Ronald Reagan and others implying that those who march against US policy are unwitting dupes of the Kremlin.

"The balance between the people's right to know and considerations of national security is being overturned," Schapp said. "The current Administration has adopted concealment as a style. For 25 years, government acted on

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